THE CURRENT MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT CRISIS IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Migration and displacement in Nigeria have become serious humanitarian, social, economic, and moral crises that demand urgent political and pastoral attention. What once appeared to be a temporary phenomenon has gradually developed into a deep and enduring challenge with far-reaching consequences not only for national stability, but also for the protection of human dignity.

According to the International Organization for Migration, migration is “the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State, to a new residence.”[1] The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs further defines a long-term migrant as a person who resides outside his or her country of origin for at least twelve months.[2] Displacement, however, refers to the movement of persons over short or long distances with the intention of settling either temporarily or permanently.

Nigeria has experienced different forms of migration throughout its history. These movements have been shaped by trade, kinship systems, colonial boundaries, urbanization, insecurity, poverty, political instability, and environmental pressures. In contemporary Nigeria, migration and displacement have assumed alarming dimensions because of armed conflict, terrorism, banditry, communal violence, economic hardship, and environmental degradation. Consequently, millions of Nigerians have been forced to leave their homes either voluntarily or involuntarily in search of security, survival, and better living conditions.

This article examines the migration and displacement crisis in Nigeria by focusing on the historical evolution of migration

patterns in the country. It highlights the major forms and causes of migration while emphasizing the social and moral implications of the crisis for both migrants and host communities.

Historical Context of Migration in Nigeria

The roots of migration and displacement in Nigeria can be traced to the pre-colonial era, when mobility formed an integral aspect of trade, kinship relations, and cultural interaction. Understanding the evolution of migration through the colonial and post-colonial periods provides a clearer perspective on the contemporary migration crisis and the moral questions associated with it.[3]

Pre-Colonial Migration Patterns

Before the establishment of British colonial rule, the territory now known as Nigeria already possessed a long history of population mobility. Different communities moved freely for trade, farming, pastoral activities, and cultural exchange. Indigenous trade routes linked various ethnic groups across regions and encouraged social interaction and economic cooperation. Colonial boundaries later divided ethnic groups and families, thereby creating artificial borders that many people still cross today in order to maintain kinship and cultural ties.[4]

Migration during this period occurred both within and beyond present-day Nigeria. Long before the emergence of the modern Nigerian state, migration played a central role in shaping the ethnic and cultural identities of many Nigerian communities. The Bantu expansion, which included the ancestors of the Igbo and Yoruba peoples, contributed significantly to the settlement patterns and linguistic development of southern Nigeria.[5] In northern Nigeria, the Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Hausa city-states actively participated in trans-Saharan trade networks that encouraged both voluntary and forced migration through interactions between Arab-Berber traders and Black African communities.[6]

Migration During the Colonial Era

The introduction of colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fundamentally altered migration patterns in Nigeria. British colonial administration established a capitalist economic system based on cash-crop production and the exportation of raw materials. This economic transformation encouraged rural-urban migration as many Nigerians moved to emerging colonial cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Kano, which became major administrative and commercial centers. Wage labour also created a new working class whose members often left their ancestral homes in search of employment opportunities.[7]

When the British government assumed direct control of Nigerian territories on 1 January 1900 following the withdrawal of the charter of the Royal Niger Company, profound political, economic, and social changes took place. Earlier migration movements caused by wars and religious conflicts gradually diminished as colonial authority imposed relative peace and administrative order across different regions. Migration during this period became largely influenced by colonial economic interests and administrative policies.[8]

Colonial Nigeria equally witnessed an increase in inter-regional migration. According to Reuben Udo, migrants were present in all ninety-three administrative divisions of Nigeria. Based on the 1952/1953 census, the Igbo emerged as the most mobile ethnic group, followed by the Yoruba and Hausa peoples. Yoruba traders were found in nearly every administrative division, while both Igbo and Hausa migrants could be identified across different regions of the country.[9]

Furthermore, the colonial government promoted seasonal labour migration, particularly from northern Nigeria. Many workers, commonly referred to as yan cin rani, travelled to southern regions during the dry season to work on farms, railways, and

construction projects.[10] Although this pattern of migration strengthened inter-regional interaction and economic cooperation, it also planted the seeds of future competition over land, political representation, and economic resources.[11]

Migration in the Post-Colonial Era

Nigeria's independence in 1960 inaugurated a new phase in the history of migration. Migration patterns became increasingly shaped by urbanization, development policies, economic inequality, and state formation processes. Massive government investments in urban centers accelerated rural-urban migration as cities such as Lagos, Kano, Kaduna, Calabar, Sokoto, and Benin City attracted both skilled and unskilled labour. The rapid growth of these urban centers soon exceeded available infrastructural capacity.[12]

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) represented a decisive turning point in the history of displacement and forced migration in Nigeria. The conflict generated large-scale internal displacement, particularly among Igbo populations in southeastern Nigeria. Post-war reconstruction efforts failed to address adequately the ethnic tensions and humanitarian consequences produced by the conflict.[13]

The oil boom of the 1970s further intensified migration toward oil-producing regions in southern Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta. While the oil economy generated enormous wealth for the nation, it also widened regional inequalities and contributed to environmental degradation, thereby encouraging further migration and social unrest.[14]

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the rise of large-scale international migration among educated Nigerians fleeing economic decline, political instability, and military authoritarianism.[15] The implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) under the regime of General Ibrahim

Babangida, influenced by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, resulted in severe economic hardship, unemployment, and social dislocation.[16] Consequently, many Nigerians migrated abroad in search of economic survival, security, and human dignity.

This period also marked the beginning of sustained migration to countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Many Nigerian migrants sought permanent residency and citizenship abroad rather than temporary migration. Over time, this trend contributed significantly to the phenomenon of brain drain as highly skilled professionals increasingly left Nigeria for better opportunities overseas.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of migration in Nigeria demonstrates that migration is both deeply rooted and continuously evolving. From pre-colonial movements shaped by trade and kinship networks to colonial economic restructuring, the disruptions of the Civil War, and the socio-economic crises of the post-colonial era, migration has remained an integral part of Nigerian society.

Contemporary migration and displacement crises in Nigeria are therefore not isolated phenomena but the outcome of historical, political, economic, and social processes that have developed over time. Understanding these historical dynamics is essential for addressing the present crisis effectively. It also highlights the need for humane migration policies that not only address the root causes of displacement but also uphold the dignity, rights, and welfare of migrants and displaced persons.

Footnotes

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